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GEORGE AICHELE, JR.

Two Forms of Metafantasy

I will begin with a contrast between two very different contemporary views of what literary fantasy is. The first has been held, with many variations, by thinkers as diverse as S. T. Coleridge. J. R. R. Tolkien, and Ernst Bloch, and is sometimes referred to as the modernist theory. Its proponents argue that fantasy is the attempt to escape from the real world, which is encountered by post-Kantian metaphysics as a "hollow space" (Ortega y Gasset). This escape may be positive and constructive into the freedom of a vital destiny—or negative and destructive, an irresponsible flight from one's real situation. In either case, the possibility of escape is dependent upon the prior reality of the hollow space. Fantasy inhabits a "secondary world" which has been imaginatively reconstructed from elements of the "primary world" of everyday reality. Even Tolkien's *evangelium*—which is clearly more important to him than the "real" world—is secondary to the primary world of modern civilization, and the secondary belief which it requires must likewise depend upon a primary belief, which Tolkien never describes but which can only be in the validity of the modernist metaphysics.

In contrast, the postmodern view holds that fantasy lies prior to any belief—it is, in the words of Tzvetan Todorov, a near belief or prebelief—and it disrupts every metaphysical identity or reality. Fantasy is anti-genre, anti-language, anti-world; it is the paradox that lies hidden at the heart of every myth, where it grounds itself in the sheer materiality of language. Fantasy is language speaking itself, reversing every decidable meaning into an endless undecidability. For the postmodern view, there is no escape from the abyss that opens between the signifier, which is always meaningless-in-itself (because incomplete, empty), and

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the signified which would fulfill its meaning. The fantastic escape is false, occurring when we decide the undecidable—when we transform what Julia Kristeva calls the semiotic into the symbolic through the violence of a hermeneutics—and thereby achieve the ordered stability of a meaning. For the postmodern view, this is where the fantastic comes to an end, for the fantastic lies, as Todorov and others argue, in a fundamental hesitation or undecidability between the uncanny—for which a natural explanation is possible—and the marvelous, which can be explained only in terms of the supernatural.

Therefore one crucial aspect of the theory of fantasy concerns the story's "resistance" to any decidability, and conversely, our efforts as actual author/readers to decide—to "de-fantasize"—that story through a hermeneutical strategy. My present concern is with how fantasies as narratives resist our hermeneutics, and what that resistance itself says or implies about fantasy and hermeneutics. I am particularly interested here in one of the ways in which fantasy subverts any defantasizing strategy. I call this fantastic subgenre "metafantasy," following R. E. Foust, and I think that it in turn can be divided into two related forms, between which some valuable comparisons can be made.

Like many other types of fantasy, metafantasy establishes two or more worlds, each a distorted image of the other, but unlike other fantasies, it allows no escape from one to the other; instead it establishes an endless oscillation between worlds, a reciprocal interference with one another which becomes more and more violent until a blurring of every self-identical entity occurs. The story's beginning may be orderly, but no new order or return to meaning clearly emerges after the fantastic disruption. The two forms of metafantasy differ in the degree to which the oscillation between worlds affects the story.

Metafantasy: Peter Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*

Many literary fantasies are indeed amenable to a modernist hermeneutic: the gate which separates yet connects distinct realities, the path between them which leads to the discovery of one's true self, one's unique destiny. Such stories invite extratextual commentaries which inevitably defantasize them. However, these fantasies cannot raise explicitly the question of true and

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false, of real and unreal. Their separated worlds are equally real and true, mutually exclusive except for the gate between them and the consequent escape. In metafantasy, the worlds oscillate with each other constantly and there is no distinct gate or escape—these metaphysical questions are thus very important.

R. E. Foust used "metafantasy" to describe Peter S. Beagle's book, *The Last Unicorn*. For Foust, metafantasy expresses the metafictional self-referentiality and paradoxicality so characteristic of much contemporary fiction, as analyzed by Robert Scholes and others. Todorov describes this metafictionality as an inversion of the fantastic hesitation.

The Last Unicorn opens in a "lilac wood" inhabited by a unicorn—evidently not our primary world. Yet through this wood pass two human hunters, who are debating the existence of unicorns. The story reveals to us that with very few exceptions, humans are able to see unicorns only as beautiful horses. The unicorn meets a butterfly that can talk, but only, we are told, by mimicking what it hears. The words of this non-normal insect are a potpourri of all-too-normal popular songs, trite sayings, sentimental poetry, commercial jingles, etc.—until it reveals to the unicorn, quite unexpectedly, that all of the other unicorns have been captured and hidden. The unicorn is herself soon captured by Mommy Fortuna, an old woman who is able to recognize her and who runs a sort of sideshow consisting mainly of normal animals disguised by magic to look like legendary monsters—yet even the unicorn and the other "genuine" mythical specimen, a harpy, must also be disguised or the customers will not recognize them as such. It appears that only through illusions can we perceive the real—and then only sometimes.

The unicorn meets a second-rate magician, Schmendrick, who has been condemned to live forever, or until he becomes a "true" magician,[1] at which point he will regain his mortality. He does achieve mortality later in the story, by first transforming the immortal unicorn into a mortal woman, and then later still, changing her back into the immortal unicorn. For the most part, however, he is skillfully incompetent. Time and eternity are thus

1 It is implied that magic is opposed to meaning (Beagle, p. 22). Magic appears in this story in conjunction with self-referentiality (pp. 63, 123), and in opposition to truth (p. 26).

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put into play alongside the real and the unreal: Schmendrick's "real" mortality and the unicorn's "real" immortality (cf. Foust, p. 15). Magician and unicorn travel together. They meet a princess who does not believe in unicorns but goes through the motions of trying to catch one—because that's what a princess has to do—and Captain Cully and his band of brigands, who live out a "false," distorted version of the Robin Hood legend. Schmendrick breaks up the gang by showing them the "real" Robin Hood, through a magical illusion. They also meet Molly Grue, Cully's camp follower, who is a sort of second-hand Maid Marian but nonetheless is able to recognize the unicorn.

There are a number of superficial resemblances between this story and other fantasies: disjunctions in time, a secret gateway, and a dangerous path leading to a blind monster's lair. Like many other fantasies, Beagle's story has a "happy ending," although unlike the closure of "they lived happily ever after," it is an open ending, suggesting the beginning of new stories, an endless narrativity. The immortal unicorn is herself, we are told, "a story with no ending, happy or sad" (p. 233).

Yet unlike many fantasies, in this story these features do not connect the two worlds. The princess eats a box lunch and reads a magazine. The evil King Haggard and his troops wear chain mail made of bottle caps. Again and again the normal (our primary world) and the non-normal are thrown together in juxtapositions that are often funny but neither uncanny nor marvelous. The result is a sort of Dada effect, a metonymic clashing which refuses allegorizing. By referring to its own fictionality, *The Last Unicorn* undermines our "suspension of disbelief," but without returning us to an unambiguous primary world.

"Haven't you even been in a fairy tale before?" Schmendrick asks Molly (p. 108), and later he tells the Lady Amalthea, the mortally-transformed unicorn, "You're in the story with the rest of us now" (p. 128). In contrast, the pretransformation unicorn is not in the story: "She is real" (p. 109). But of course we can see her in the story, for the implied reader also can recognize a unicorn; thus the unicorn points to an outside of the story, an extratextual reality. She is like the Midgard Serpent, which simultaneously encircles the world and is contained in one of Mommy Fortuna's circus wagons. The serpent in question is "false," however, while the unicorn is "real" (pp. 22–23). Such

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a reading leads us back to the modernist metaphysics; insofar as the story invites the actual reader to find the timeless magic of the unicorn in the primary world about us—in the breakers on a seashore, the quiet of a forest glade, or even one's own heart—that has in fact happened.

All of the major characters are seeking the truth or reality of the unicorn. Haggard wants to complete his collection, an obsessive desire to possess immortal beauty. Prince Lír, the king's foundling son and the story's self-referentially proclaimed "leading man" (p. 109), out of desire for the Lady Amalthea, becomes a magnificent, stereotypical prince in the best fairy tale tradition—but also a bad poet and a man who can sacrifice his own desire for the good of his beloved. Schmendrick seeks liberation from his curse of immortality and atonement for the "harm" he has done to the unicorn by transforming her and saving her from the Red Bull, Haggard's supernatural unicorn-catcher. For each of these men, his identity, his destiny, is resolved in the identifying and releasing of the unicorn.

Only the two central females (and we might also add Mommy Fortuna) stand outside this movement toward a conclusion. It is striking that in each of Beagle's fantasy writings, as here, it is a female character or characters that play this disruptive role. Molly and the unicorn/Amalthea are, in effect, what Kristeva calls the semiotic *chora*, the maternal and material receptacle or nondisjunction that short-circuits the story's teleology, its drive towards the closure of meaning, the identification of the real. It is no surprise that they figure in its self-referentiality.[2]

Molly and Mommy are nearly identical in name, and as characters they are negative images of each other—a small but striking example of the meaningless letter that founds the symbolic reversal. Molly sees the unicorn as she is and can do nothing to save or harm her. She loves the reality which is the unicorn, but she does not attempt to own it or change it. Yet it

2 See also Foust, pp. 11–12. In the introduction to his collected fantasy stories, Beagle speaks of writing itself as fantastic, a lie (pp. 10, 13). But is he serious? He wrote the screenplay to Ralph Bakshi's animated film version of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, and he clearly admires Tolkien's work very much (see his essay in Boyer/Zahorski). It is thus somewhat ironic that females are so insignificant in Tolkien's fantasies, and so crucial in Beagle's.

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is Molly who moves the plot along at the point of near-paralysis, when the male movement toward a destiny, toward reality, has nearly collapsed. Molly uncovers the secret way to the lair of the Bull—not by actively seeking it out, but by listening when it is revealed. The kitchen cat who tells Molly the way speaks in riddles, but Molly "has ears to hear."

Amalthea at first bitterly objects to her human metamorphosis, her new, dying body, but as she falls in love with Lír, her former immortality becomes for her an "old bad dream" (p. 187), and so she must be retransformed against her will. Yet it is only because she retains her love for Lír after she is again a unicorn that she can face the Red Bull and drive him into the sea, releasing the trapped unicorns. Immortal once again, she nonetheless retains her mortal memories and feelings and becomes a contradiction, a mortal immortal—or in classical theological language, a God-man. At this point, the oscillation between worlds becomes a fusion; as the immortal becomes mortal, the real becomes illusory, and vice versa.

The refusal of teleology (purpose, destiny) embodied in the female characters and the temporal paradox of the metametamorphosed unicorn disrupts the metaphysical duality of real and unreal which is essential to the modernist fantasy of escape. The ironic play of traditional fairy tale and nontraditional elements raises fundamental questions about the metaphysics of narrative, and therefore also about the reader's primary world. This oscillation and fusion of opposed worlds distinguishes metafantasy as a subgenre and makes it more thoroughly and explicitly antimetaphysical and antigeneric than other forms of fantasy.

Metafantasy: Philip Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*

A modernist reading, however, can still find identity—i.e., meaning—in *The Last Unicorn*.[3] The unicorn, although an "absurd animal" (p. 118), is nonetheless meaningful. Yet a more extreme

3 Foust's analysis is itself an example of this: "Beagle's narrative . . . always thrusts through numerous self-imposed difficulties to identity. The mode is thus metamorphic/metonymic, for it is essential to the creation of 'imagined wonder' that the characters and events be treated as real" (p. 13).

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form of metafantasy is possible. Like *The Last Unicorn*, Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* centers on an anti-metaphysical oscillation of real and unreal, but in this case the nondisjunction appears as a book—a book apparently written by another book.

The novel presents an "alternate history"—that is, how the contemporary (1962) world would be if history had deviated in the past from the actual (primary world) course of events. In this case, Franklin Roosevelt was successfully assassinated during his first term by Joe Zangara, and as a result of that, the U.S. lacked effective leadership up to and during World War II; the Allies, moreover, were defeated by Germany and Japan, who have divided the world between them. Africa has been devastated and Russia has become the breadbasket of Germany. The extermination of the Jewish people approaches completion in German-dominated parts of the world, including the eastern remains of the U.S., but the Japanese have a far more humanitarian (although patronizing) attitude toward their conquered territories, including the western remains of the U.S., and they do not actively persecute the subject peoples.

The novel consists of a complex, interwoven network of stories, in a sort of fugue structure (McNelly, p. 1326), all pointing in one direction: toward the uncovering of the truth about this world, the reality it conceals. Frank Frink and his friend quit their jobs making fake "historical artifacts" from prewar America and go into business making "genuine" contemporary American jewelry. Robert Childan, a Nazi sympathizer who sells the spurious artifacts to eager Japanese collectors, also switches to selling the authentic merchandise after a threat (itself a hoax) that his customers have discovered that his goods are false, and when his customers indeed discover the "Tao" within the genuine jewelry. Mr. Tagomi, a Japanese government representative to the conquered Pacific States of America, thwarts a German plot to annihilate Japan in a nuclear strike, and he eventually recognizes that his life in the world has taken him "far from the Tao"—that he has become out of touch with reality. Finally, Juliana Frink, Frank's estranged wife, discovers that the man with whom she is living is really a Nazi assassin who is attempting to kill the author of a popular novel, an alternate history in which the Allies won the Second World War.

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Juliana's story is geographically separated from the others, and her story serves as a commentary on, and a figure of, the others (cf. McNelly, p. 1326). When she discovers her lover's true identity, she (accidentally?) kills the assassin, then proceeds on to her interview with the author, whose name is Abendsen. He reveals to her that it was not so much he as the *I Ching*, the ancient Chinese "book of changes," that wrote his novel. She consults the *I Ching* on the spot, asking it why it "wrote" the novel, and it replies with the hexagram for "Inner Truth," meaning that the novel is "true": that Germany and Japan really did lose the war. Truth is thus identified with fiction, and history with falsehood. She thinks, "This book means me" (p. 231).[4]

The *I Ching* in *The Man in the High Castle* is apparently the "same" *I Ching* as in our primary world. It is composed of cryptic, oracular sayings, plus commentary on each saying, to each of which is attached a hexagram, a numerical pattern. These sayings are alleged to reflect the harmonious way, or Tao, of any possible moment, the sum total of all the possible conjunctions of circumstances in reality; by determining the proper hexagram (traditionally accomplished by "casting" yarrow stalks) and following the advice given, one can live in total harmony with ultimate reality.[5] The *I Ching* is the Transcendental Signifier of a Transcendental Signified. Tagomi says,

> We are absurd . . . because we live by a five-thousand-year-old book. We set it questions as if it were alive. It *is* alive. As is the Christian Bible; many books are actually alive. Not in metaphoric fashion. Spirit animates it (p. 65).

All the Japanese and American characters of *The Man in the High Castle* are devoted to the *I Ching* and follow its advice as

4 Note the contrast between the conversations on pp. 61, 121, and 135, and the revelations at Abendsen's house. Fiction is also identified with the Japanese (p. 107) and the Jews (p. 122). These themes, in many variations, characterize many of Dick's novels.

5 "Here came the hexagram, brought forth by the passive chance workings of the vegetable stalks. Random, and yet rooted in the moment in which he lived, in which his life was bound up with all other lives and particles in the universe. The necessary hexagram picturing in its pattern of broken and unbroken lines the *situation*" (p. 11, Dick's emphasis).

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best they can. At crucial points in the novel, it gives characters in different stories the "same" advice—or nearly the same—linking the stories metatextually.[6] The revelation that it wrote the novel within the novel tells Juliana that their world is not real, and that the alternate world is the real one—that a set of fictional characters is more real than she is. Yet *she* is a fictional character, and we note that the alternate history presented in the novel within the novel, *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*,[7] is not that of our primary world. A number of lengthy "excerpts" from that work describe a world that is arguably "more different" from our primary world than is the fictional world of Dick's novel. As Dick thoroughly demonstrates, the truth cannot be limited to isolated "facts" (e.g., the Allies won or didn't win), but rather it involves a configuration of an entire world; history is always narrative.

The dichotomy between real and unreal—true and false, genuine and fake—which is established in each of the stories is undercut by the radical questioning of the reality of the entire world depicted in the novel, the metastory which makes the individual stories possible, by the novel within the novel. The *I Ching*, the oracle that draws the diverse stories together, is also that which disrupts the text and makes it self-referential. It is the intrusion of the random, of materiality—a materiality which founds signification.[8] Dick claimed that he used the *I Ching* to compose his novel (McNelly, p. 1324), just as the character

6 Frank Frink even wonders explicitly if this could be happening (p. 13). In Italo Calvino's collection of interwoven stories, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, the Tarot decks function analogously to Dick's use of the *I Ching* in this novel.

7 The title refers to Ecclesiastes 12:5 (RSV):

"... they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way: the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails; because man goes to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets."

Portents of death and destruction (both individual and global) appear throughout Dick's dystopian novel; however, the title seems inappropriate to Abendsen's (e)utopia—or is it also not what it appears to be? Does this imply some further reversal of real and nonreal?

8 As each of the stories ends, that which had previously been established as small and insignificant—e.g., the tiny bit of jewelry on which Tagomi medi-

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Abendsen did with his novel. But how seriously are we to take this? And if it is true, what follows? If the *I Ching* wrote a book X in which the *I Ching* wrote a book Y, in which book X was revealed to be false, what does that say about the truth value of book Y, or of the *I Ching*? What if, in *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*, the *I Ching* were to write a book Z—in which the Allies lost, of course—and so on? It is this abyss of self-referentiality that opens up beneath each of the characters when "Inner Truth" is revealed. We have a fictional world that proclaims its own fictionality, like the paradox of Epimenides, the Cretan who announced that all Cretans are liars: we can neither believe it (believe that it is a fiction) nor disbelieve it (because it is true). Again we have near belief, only at a more decisive level within the narrative than in Beagle's story.

The conventions of realistic fiction require that the actual readers pretend ("suspend disbelief") that the fictional world is real; this is the illusion of realism, made possible by the separation between signifier and signified. When fiction admits to its own fictionality it becomes what Scholes calls metafiction, but it also remains, as Scholes notes (pp. 3–4), fantastic. When fantasy admits its own fictionality, its own fantasticality, it becomes metafantasy, and in its more extreme form, it takes us beyond any possibility of metaphysics, of any hermeneutical identity in which we can believe. *The Man in the High Castle* sets realism against itself, and thus the return of these characters to the conventional (secondary) world of the novel remains deeply unsettling, and unsettled. The question, "which is the true America?" has been raised in such a way that it cannot be satisfactorily answered. Dick's book presents us with a "disruptive reality" (p. 248), "a way out" (p. 244) which is not an escape but an encounter with the fictionality of the real and the refusal of any hermeneutical, metaphysical closure.

As noted at the outset, the modernist theories of fantasy, such as Tolkien's, remain committed to a hermeneutics of escape from the metaphysical hollow space of our primary world to the

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tates—is found both to conceal and to reveal great meaning, but in highly ambiguous ways. As in Beagle's story, the ending is "open," but here the endlessness is threatened by a sort of pointlessness, the emptiness of a world which seems to have been deprived of even any fictive "reality."

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utopian "nowhere" of a secondary world. In the fantasy stories discussed in this paper, however, that is not the case. In each of them the self-referentiality of the text disrupts and deviates from the teleology of escape, and the material body of the sign (the maternal *chora*) refuses our attempt to possess the text by giving it a meaning.

Todorov would perhaps reply that this is consistent with his claim that contemporary literature (metafiction) "inverts" the fantastic hesitation by demolishing the polarity of the uncanny and the marvelous. I would say instead that this "completes"—plays out endlessly—the fantastic undecidability, the reversal of reversal itself, which is present in all fantasy stories, although it may be less rigorously developed or explicit in many of them.

In Dick's story (and less evidently in Beagle's), the two narrative worlds are quite explicit; even a third manifestation, perhaps that of our primary world, shows itself briefly to Mr. Tagomi. There is no movement between the two worlds, except through the reading of fiction and the ordering power of the *I Ching*. The America of the larger story is defeated and oppressed, a doomed civilization which is selling out to evil powers, yet in which tiny "seeds of beauty" still appear. The America of the story within the story is, from the fragmentary indications, idyllic and utopian. In *The Last Unicorn*, the narrative presents a cynical and greedy world, in which magicians are only entertainers and unicorns are only beautiful mares. Yet hidden within it, as the "nonstory" within the story, is an eternal and truly magical world. The paradoxical interplay of story and story-within-story, and the self-referentiality of the whole, establishes a metafantastic oscillation—is Abendsen "really" Dick? did the Allies "really" lose? did the *I Ching* "really" write this book?—which refuses the closure of an identity. Beagle's book takes us to a quite different and much more traditional paradox: the immortal which becomes mortal (and vice versa), the eternal being which remembers and grieves.[9]

One could say that the difference between these two forms of metafantasy is simply one of degree. Dick's story takes the paradoxical oscillation of worlds and pushes it farther than Beagle's

9 Beagle's most recent fantasy writing, *The Folk of the Air*, also centers on this paradoxical theme and develops it, again, in metafantastical ways.

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story does. Yet this is not enough. For Dick's story makes the oscillation central to the story's plot, and thus the lack of closure in that story is more distressing, more resistant to the reader's desire to decide its meaning. The narrative threatens to destroy itself. In Beagle's story, the oscillation, despite its importance, is more peripheral to the plot, and as a result the lack of closure and resistance to decidability can be almost covered over by the pleasantly humorous ending. Or to put the same point in structuralist terms, in Beagle's story the oscillation between worlds lies at the surface, but in Dick's story it lies at the deepest (motifemic) structures of the narrative, its fundamental ideological core.

In *The Man in the High Castle*, the *I Ching* serves as a point of metaphysical disruption, the revelation of history as unreal and of fiction as real. The readers of books are less real than the characters in fictions. Yet as a metatextual principle of order through which the most random coincidences become significant, the *I Ching* brings even this oscillation of worlds to a halt in itself—it is the "same" book for both Abendsen and Dick. Thus even a radical metafantasy such as Dick's can be "captured" by a hermeneutic: the belief (or suspended disbelief) of one who is willing to grant to the *I Ching* the status of Transcendental Signifier and to overlook its own fictionality, or the conviction that tiny "seeds of beauty" are more real than the answer to the question of "who won the war." The final note of "Inner Truth" hints at referentiality.

Metafantastic self-referentiality is not "complete"; it has not been fully played out or released. Nor can it be, for the subgenre of metafantasy, for all of its subversions of identity and meaning, still retains the unit of "being a story." For the completion of self-referentiality, if it is possible, we must seek elsewhere, in other forms of fantasy.

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